

## ARE YOU A JOE MOW & GO?

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Joe is always on the go, and justifiably so. He's got other fish to fry, or maybe catch. A 9:30 tee time, two soccer games, and a quick stop at the office is a primer for the main event. To hasten the lawn mowing time he blows in like an Indy racer, collects the mail, steps on the cat, and cranks up the engine. With tires squealing and mower set on #2 short punk hair cut, he's a ground huggin grass scalpin fool. The grass and gravel churned up by the mower blade just adds to the testosterone surge. Well Joe, here's my advice, take a siesta. You're killing your lawn, not to mention yourself. Some people even enjoy their mowing time. The exercise feels good and your sense of accomplishment is framed by the memory of your neatly clipped lawn. For your safety and a better lawn keep these tips in mind when mowing.

- The mowing rule of thumb is to never remove more than 1/3 of the plant height. Set your mower no lower than two inches and mow the grass when it reaches three inches tall. Plan on mowing the lawn once a week during the summer to stay within the 1/3 mowing height rule.
- There is no need to bag your clippings. The one inch clippings will easily filter into the grass canopy and out of sight. Grass clippings quickly decompose and are recycled as free plant food for the lawn - less fertilizer needed. Most cities prohibit dumping yard waste in land fills. If you still want to bag your clippings ask the city about a yard waste collection program - there may be an additional fee.
- Avoid scalp mowing. You are mowing too short, scalp mowing, if clippings are longer than 1.5 inches and they accumulate on the mowed surface. Continually choking the mower with tall grass is a sign that you are scalping the lawn. Scalping thins the lawn canopy, encourages weeds, and robs the plant of energy needed to make new grass during the summer. If you get in a situation where the grass is too tall then raise your mowing height until you are removing about one third of the grass height. Each week set the mower down a notch, usually about a half inch, until you are at your target mowing height. The only time a lower than normal mowing is acceptable is for the first mowing in the spring. This will remove the winter burned leaves and help the soil warm up faster.
- Safer mowing is also better for the lawn. Mow taller and with the lowest throttle setting needed to cut the grass. Taller mowing means deeper roots and a more competitive lawn canopy that shades the soil and keeps out weeds. If you don't water your lawn then taller mowing is a must for survival during summer drought dormancy. From a safety perspective taller mowing reduces blade contact with bumpy ground or where loose objects like rocks and twigs are present. Using minimum power, especially in gravelly areas, will reduce the chance of throwing objects from beneath the mower.
- Two convenient features to look for in a mower are mulching decks and easily adjusted wheels for variable mowing heights. Mulching decks have a special blade and deck configuration that suspends the clippings under the deck and allows them to be chopped into smaller clippings that easily filter out of sight and into the lawn canopy. Most of the time your mower will be set at the 2.5 inch mowing height. To avoid scalping and injury to the lawn you may need to raise the mowing height. If the wheels are not easily adjusted then you will probably just go ahead and mow too short. Avoid buying mowers with a fixed mowing height.

- Keep your mower blade properly sharpened for a clean cut. Individual grass blades will be frayed on the cut end giving a white appearance to the top of the lawn canopy. Mower blades need not be razor sharp to cut grass. In fact you want a rather thick but beveled edge to the blade that as it will produce a clean cut as the blade wears out. The properly sharpened blade will have no nicks and will be smooth on the bottom with a 30 to 45 degree bevel towards the top of the blade.

## Mowing your lawn

What are some of the particulars on mowing your lawn - is there a correct way to mow your lawn?

1. How often should I mow my lawn?
2. Can I mow when it is wet?
3. How do they get those stripes on baseball and football fields?
4. Do I need to pick up my clippings or use a bagger?

## Growing grass in the shade

Grass under my trees has always been weak and after this winter it is completely dead.

1. What is the best grass for growing in the shade?

Fine fescue is the best shade grass for Iowa. That would include varieties of creeping red fescue, chewings fescue, and hard fescue. In heavy shade with wet conditions rough bluegrass may also be used. Rough bluegrass should not be used where it can escape into sunny areas of the lawn. I will grow fine in the spring and fall, but will turn brown and ugly in the summer.

2. I've got a lot of moss under my tree, what should I do?

You need to physically break up the moss with a stiff hand rake or power rake. Prune the trees where possible for better light and use a fine fescue. Moss usually indicates too much shade for grasses. Consider using other plants such as ornamental sedge (looks like grass), hostas, pachysandra.

3. Can I just scatter seed on top of the soil under the trees?

NO! This never works very well. The ground must be roughed up about a half inch deep and the seed needs to be slightly covered with about a quarter inch of soil.

My lawn is just a mess of weeds and thin turf.

1. How can I rejuvenate the lawn.

If 50% or more of your lawn is the grass you desire, like Kentucky bluegrass, then controlling the weeds along with modest fertility may allow the grass to compete better and completely cover the lawn.

Use a broadleaf herbicide to control weeds such as dandelion, clover, and creeping Charlie. Use a pre-emergence grass herbicide to control weedy grasses like crabgrass and foxtail.

If you want to give up on the lawn and start over then kill all existing grass and weeds with a non-selective herbicide like Round-up. After 14 days you can use a slicer seeder to plant a new lawn.

2. My lawn only has a few thin spots how can I get them to fill in?